

MEET GREG WEST



My life started on the wrong foot. More precisely, it started with one foot. I was born with a club foot in Littleton, NH and they didn't know quite what to do with that problem in that bygone era. Shriner's hospital in Springfield, Massachusetts took me in and used an experimental procedure to slowly straighten my leg and lo and behold it worked! Been forever indebted to Shriner's.

We moved after my 1st grade year, and I found myself in a 1 room, 1 teacher, 6 grade school heated by a wood stove. Three weeks into the year the teacher called the Superintendent of Schools and told him she had a boy who had completed all of the 2nd grade workbooks and asked what was she to do with him. He came to the school, gave the boy a reading test and said, "Throw him in the 3rd grade." This resulted in my only spending 11 years in school and graduating second youngest in my class.

But, I was lucky to be in a class with a few athletes and we were State champions in football and basketball my junior year and repeated as basketball champs my senior year.

We were not poor, but there was no money for college so I worked in a shoe factory the first winter after graduation. My older brother convinced me to go to Alaska in the spring of 1959 to work fighting forest fires. Lots of fun - but I still did not get to school that fall. The next winter, I worked in a paper machinery plant not far from home, but I went back to Alaska the following spring. Fighting fires was good that summer and I started school at University of New Hampshire in the fall of 1960. I stayed in school continually until January of 1964, returning to Alaska each summer to fight those fires.

At the end of the fire season that summer, some Smokejumpers who I had become friends with at fires (and truth be told-- in the local bars) encouraged me to apply to become one of them. I did. Shortly after my last semester started in January 1964, a letter arrived offering me the chance to become a Smokejumper. If I stayed in school and graduated in June, I was going to become an Army 2nd Lt. because I was in Advanced ROTC. I had a choice. I did what any red-blooded young man would do – I chose Smoke jumping, which sounded much more exciting and fun.

Sooo - I dropped out of school and began my Smokejumper career in April of '64. That fall, with the draft staring us in the face, three friends and I joined the US Army Reserves. Turns out we were extremely lucky because the unit at Ft. Wainwright, Alaska was the only one in the country that had openings. I was off to basic and Military Occupational Specialty training that winter and I got out just in time to get back to work jumping in the spring. I worked as a jumper every summer until 1969.

I had to go back to UNH for two semesters (rather than one) in the fall of 1966 and 67 because I changed majors. I discovered that I had failed to fulfill a language requirement so no degree for me (actually, I knew this to be the case but hoped if I kept quiet no one would notice). In the fall of 1968, a jumper friend persuaded me to apply to law school. At the same time, the Bureau of Land Management offered me a permanent job. I decided it was time to grow up, stop jumping out of airplanes and drinking beer and move on. I had to take Spanish at the University of Alaska to get my degree, and UNH finally gave me a degree in January of 1969. Good thing. I had a beer mug from my fraternity at UNH that said my graduation date was 196? Just made it. It only took 9 years!

Jumping was the best job I ever had. I made 89 jumps to fires mostly in Alaska, but also in Montana and Idaho. In August of '67, I was the first Alaska trained jumper to be made a squad leader. All the rest had been trained "outside" (Alaska-speak for the lower 48).

I graduated from Willamette University College of Law in Salem, Oregon in May 1972. I remained in Salem and spent nine years there, first in the City Attorney's Office and later in private practice. In 1981, I was elected a District Court Judge; and, in 1986, was elected to the Circuit Court. I retired in 2003 when my first wife, Susan, succumbed to breast cancer. But, I spent five more years as a Senior Judge, working 7 weeks a year. I was Presiding Judge of the 3rd Judicial District of Oregon for 5 years and later served as both Vice President and President of the Oregon Circuit Judges Association.

My introduction to cards was Canasta. My mother played on Sunday afternoons and if one of the gals couldn't make it, you know who got drafted to play. Jumpers were not only good at drinking beer, they also loved Pinochle. So, that came next.

In the fall of 1967, my girlfriend at the time invited me to her parents cabin on Harding Lake, just south of Fairbanks, for Labor Day. Her mom said they had friends coming down from Fairbanks and they played bridge. Her husband didn't play - so she asked if I could play. "Of course," I said. After a few hands I said, "I don't know what the hell you folks are playing but this isn't what we played at my fraternity." They gave me a copy of Alfred Scheinwold's "5 Weeks To Winning Bridge." Fairbanks' Farthest North Bridge Club had games on Tuesday and Friday nights and they took me under their collective wings and had me winning in just a few weeks. By then I had memorized not only the book, but also all the questions and answers.

My son was a pretty good basketball player and we journeyed to Phoenix in summer of '98 to watch his team play in a national tournament. While there, I scouted out retirement communities but I didn't care for Phoenix. A salesperson at Pebble Creek said, "You people from the Northwest seem to like Saddlebrooke in Tucson more than what we have here."

Wouldn't you know it? My bridge team qualified for the National GNTs that next summer in San Antonio, so we planned a stop in Tucson on the way home to take a look. I bought a place before we left for home! I didn't get to use it much until the winter of '02 but I must have liked it 'cuz I'm still here. It didn't take long to get to know all of the Saddlebrooke bridge people. Like bridge people everywhere -- always welcoming and friendly.

Bridge has been so very good to me. I have met so many wonderful and unique people playing this game. I have also been blessed with wonderful bridge partners who have dragged me across the winner's line many times. I have been lucky enough to have many Sectional and Regional titles to reflect on and I represented District 20 twice in both the GN pairs and GN teams.

I have never won a National title but I came close a couple of times. The San Antonio trip saw my team finish in a 3-4 tie in the GNT Flight A finals. We lost to a team from New Jersey in the semifinals when our teammates got to 7 Spades -- unfortunately with 4 missing spades to the jack behind the AKQ. At our table they decided to bid 7NT and found 13 tricks without the need for the spade suit. We lost 20 IMPs and the match by 2. Bill Howard and I finished 3rd of 298 pairs in the 6-session Mini-Blue Ribbon Pairs at the 2013 Nationals in Phoenix.

I have been married to Norma, who I met at Saddlebrooke, since 2006. I have a son, Mark, who works for Verizon and who just moved to Florida from Maui. Mark has a 3 year old daughter. My daughter Jocelyn lives in Salem, Oregon and has three sons and a daughter.

An important lesson I learned a LONG time ago -- Be EXTRA KIND to your partner as she or he is the ONLY person at the table who is on your side.